

TRAVELLER HORSES, LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND PUBLIC POLICY IN CONTEMPORARY IRELAND

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Introduction

The purpose of this article¹ is to critically examine public policy with respect to the control of ‘wandering horses’ owned by Travellers² in Ireland, a topic that has received little scholarly attention. While horses are often mentioned or alluded to in key anthropological works or depicted in photographic images in them, rarely is this feature of Traveller culture interrogated in a systematic way with the result that our understanding of it is somewhat limited. For example, Gmelch (1977) devotes just three pages to a discussion of horses while in Helleiner (2000) horses are mentioned only rarely. In McCann, Ó Siocháin and Ruane (1994) there is an occasional reference to horses. The work of Saris et al. (2000) is one of the few scholarly articles that directly bears on the issue of Traveller horses but this important piece of anthropological research is limited to the experiences of one high-poverty urban community in Dublin.

Thus, the present paper attempts to contribute to our understanding of Irish Travellers by examining current policy and practice with respect to Traveller horses. The paper explores the implications of public policy for Traveller culture and specifies the contribution anthropologists and sociologists can make to current thinking and policy decisions about this important, though often neglected, dimension of Irish Traveller culture. This analysis draws on the author’s personal experience working as a housing liaison officer in a local authority housing setting in a midland town in Ireland over an 18-month period, work which was concerned with the day-to-day management of local authority housing estates. The article claims that public policy fails to deal adequately with the underlying condition that creates the wandering horse problem in the first place – the lack of adequate grazing land for Travellers living in local authority-provided housing and halting sites. Moreover, I argue that public policy with respect to Traveller horses, as reflected in the provisions of the Control of Horses Act, 1996, (henceforth, ‘The Act’) relating to the licensing, seizure and detention of horses, threatens to devalue Traveller culture and marginalize Travellers from mainstream sedentary society.

To provide a context for the paper, I begin by exploring change and continuity in the place of horses in Traveller culture. This is followed by a description and analysis of the two principal policy responses to the wandering horse problem – the Control of Horses Act, 1996, and youth horse projects, with a particular focus on the Act. The final section of the article sheds some light on the policy implications of this analysis and the linkage between policy and culture.

The Place of Horses in Irish Traveller Culture: Continuity and Change

Travellers are Ireland's indigenous 'Other'. They share the same skin colour as white settled people and are not easily identifiable as Travellers on the basis of physical features alone. Yet, Travellers are considered as outsiders in their own society or, as Mac Laughlin puts it, they are at best considered as:

An incongruous social residue from a pre-modern past, a people to be paternalistically admired for their determination to remain doggedly true to an unconventional lifestyle in a rapidly changing and increasingly materialistic and 'settled' society. (Mac Laughlin 1995: 10)

One feature of that lifestyle that is viewed as unconventional and increasingly as uncivilized in contemporary consumer-oriented Ireland is the practice of keeping horses. Indeed, Gmelch argues that, from the perspective of settled people, trespassing horses is one of the "nuisance aspects" of Travellers' lifestyle (Gmelch 1975: 98). Horses have long held a special place in both the Irish Traveller culture and economy. Popular films such as *Into the West*, for instance, have romantically depicted Traveller horses as a core feature of Travellers' collective identity.

Travellers have traditionally bought and sold horses at fairs (Gmelch 1986). The rise of the supermarket and mall culture in Ireland, however, has meant that many of these fairs have become a thing of the past. Only a few continue in existence to this day. One of the most important of these is the Ballinasloe fair, County Galway, where Travellers come from far and wide to trade, socialize, renew kinship bonds and sometimes fight (see Gmelch, 1986, for a discussion of horse fairs). In between, smaller marts in towns and villages provide opportunity for a more steady income. Horse keeping and trading is a gendered activity – it is dominated by Traveller men and boys – and horses are conceived of less as commodities than as allies among Travellers (Court 1985: 48). MacGréine (1931–32) highlights the cleverness and business acumen of Travellers when it comes to trading in horses and driving a bargain, a point echoed in Stewart's study of Gypsies in Hungary (Stewart 1997; see also Gmelch 1986):

It is mostly in the selling of asses and horses that tinkers resort to trickery. The manner in which they transform aged and decrepit animals into seemingly young and spirited ones, is marvelous. They usually work on the system of exchanging a young animal with some trusting countryman for an old one plus a few shillings. Often as not they may make several exchanges in the course of a few weeks with the same man, bringing him on each occasion a better animal in exchange for the one they had already given him, but they never exchange without receiving some money. (1932–31: 177)

This horse keeping tradition has also long given rise to antagonism between Travellers and the 'dominant house dwelling society' as Okely puts it (1994: 4).

The 1983 Report of the Travelling People Review Body, for instance, identified horses, among other things, as a site of contestation between Travellers and settled people (RTPRB 1983: 24) and its view of Traveller horses is less benign than that taken by the later report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community (RTFTC 1995). Nowhere in the RTPRB's report is the place of horses in Traveller culture acknowledged as important and worthy whereas the RTFTC prefaces its comments about Travellers with a section on their cultural importance. Furthermore, the RTPRB devotes just twenty lines of its report to the horse issue and focuses on Travellers' need to respect the interests and sensitivities of settled people. Thus, for example, it writes that:

The Travellers must learn to understand the anxieties of the settled community. They must realize that certain of their actions, such as brawling, street begging, and allowing horses to wander, cause offence and they should take steps to eliminate the practices where they exist ... legislation relating to wandering horses should be strengthened and provide for confiscation of the animals. (RTPRB 1983: 31)

The RTFTC, on the other hand, devotes a page out of a total of two hundred and eighty six to Traveller horses and eschews any talk about Travellers having to conform to the values and norms of settled society.

Up until the 1960s, Traveller wagons and caravans were horse-drawn. As the car culture began to emerge, more and more caravans were transported from place to place by motor vehicles such as the popular Hiace van. In 1960, 674 Traveller families out of a total of 1,198 families lived in horse-drawn caravans, which represented 56 percent of the total Traveller population (Ó Riain 2000: 109; Mac Laughlin 1995: 40). The reliance of Travellers on horse-drawn transport was commented upon by the 1963 Commission on Itinerancy. It stated, in character with its general anti-Traveller bias, that a movement away from a dependence on horse-drawn transportation towards motorized vehicles would reduce the likelihood of damage to the property and economic interests of settled people in rural areas – “it is clear that the trouble and injury that itinerants cause to the rural community by trespass and damage to crops etc. would diminish substantially if they changed over to motorized transport” (quoted in Dempsey and Geary 1979: 5–6). Here Travellers are portrayed as lacking in virtue and as holding values that are incongruent with ‘modern’ living.

Today there are no empirical data available on how many Travellers live in the circumstances described above. Current available data only provide information about the number of Travellers living in conventional local authority housing, halting sites and transient sites. Indeed, the term ‘horse-drawn’ seems to have disappeared from the statistical literature pertaining to Travellers altogether.

However, despite technological and social change resulting from modernization and urbanization the horse continues to occupy a special, though somewhat undervalued place, at least among settled people anyhow, in the Traveller culture

and economy, playing an important role, both symbolic and material, in the lives of the one quarter of Travellers that continue the horse keeping tradition (McCarthy n.d.: 17).

Policy Responses to the Wandering Horse Problem

As mentioned earlier, there have been two key policy responses to the wandering horse problem. This section of the paper examines each in turn.

The Control of Horses Act, 1996

Legislative Background

In December 1996, the Control of Horses Act (hereafter referred to as ‘the Act’) was introduced in Ireland to codify the control of horses, a practice that before this was done in an informal and ad hoc way (Saris et al. 2000). The purpose of the act was “to provide for the control of horses and to make provision for the licensing of horses in urban and other areas where horses cause a danger to persons or property or nuisance and to amend certain other enactments relating to animals and to provide for related matters”. Strangely enough, it makes no mention of Travellers, although it is quite clear that the architects of the Act had Travellers in mind when they were framing it. In any case, it is fairly true to say that while some horses kept in public areas belong to settled people, the majority kept in public areas and especially public open spaces adjacent to large urban housing estates, are owned by Travellers, and cared for by young Traveller boys.

The first Bill to deal with the wandering horse problem in Ireland was introduced as a Private Member’s Bill in June 1990 by then Minister for Social Welfare, Proinsias de Rossa³. The then Taoiseach⁴ stated that he hoped, given its importance, that it would command cross-party support. However, this Bill did not become law although it provided a point of departure for the Control of Horses Bill, 1996, (hereafter referred to as ‘the Bill’) which was introduced in March 1996. The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Deputy Deenihan, who introduced the latter Bill stated that he borrowed heavily from the shelved De Rossa Private Members Bill. Minister Deenihan introduced the Bill in the First Stage.

The Bill then moved on to Second Stage where it was debated in May and June 1996. The focus of the Second Stage was on the need for the Bill, how wandering horses can make life intolerable for residents living in large urban housing estates, and the importance of enforcing the legislation and providing adequate resources for this purpose. In this stage the Bill was heralded as a silver-bullet solution to the wandering horse problem. Thus, for example, the Minister for Social Welfare, Proinsias De Rossa, stated the following:

For the first time local authorities will have the power to answer the demands of local communities and act to tackle this problem. Children will be safe playing outside their homes; motorists will be free to drive and people with cars parked outside their homes will no longer be afraid of their being damaged by galloping horses. (Dáil Éireann, Second Stage, 25 June, 1996)

At the end of June 1996, the Bill was referred to the Select Committee on Enterprise and Economic Strategy for consideration. The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Mr Deenihan, told the committee that by introducing the Bill the government was fulfilling its promise as set forth in its programme for government, *A Government for Renewal*, to introduce legislation to deal with the wandering horse problem. Further, he stated that he established a consultative committee comprising key stakeholders including local authorities, the *Garda* (police), and relevant government departments. Notably, Travellers were not invited to participate in this committee although they made representations to the Minister along with other stakeholders. This is surprising given that in recent years organizations such as the Irish Traveller Movement have become more articulate and media savvy in amplifying the voice of Travellers (Mac Laughlin 1995). In October 1996, the Bill made its way to the Committee Stage where a number of amendments were made to it. Finally, in early December 1996, the Bill reached the final Report Stage where the focus of parliamentary discussion was on the rationale for control areas, the concept on which the Bill pivots, and the potential effect of earlier drafts of the Bill on individual property rights.

Why, then, did this act become law in 1996? What factors led to the perceived need to regulate the keeping of horses through the legal system? Put another way, why did it become a public issue at all? The impetus for the new law, in part, grew out of fears that Traveller horses were increasingly posing a threat to the health and safety of settled people. Indeed, it was estimated at the time that there were 3,000 wandering horses in Dublin city and county alone with the bulk in the administrative area of South Dublin County Council. The threat posed to public order by stray horses, the main worry of politicians and other policy actors, was reinforced by discourse such as 'urban cowboys', 'urban jungle', 'ghetto culture' and 'horse crazy' in media representations of horses in disadvantaged⁵ urban communities such as Ballyfermot, Cherry Orchard and Tallaght. Analogies drawn between these communities and 'the Wild West' serve to portray them as havens of lawlessness and gangsterism (Gibbons 1996: 24). Overall, this 'us' versus 'them' discourse has the effect of demonizing and pathologizing an already marginalized group and serves to portray the horse keeping tradition as debased and uncivilized.

This enemy-making discourse, however, was not confined to the media. Public office holders also spoke about the apparent threat to the social order and body politic posed by stray horses. When the Control of Horses Bill was considered by the Select Committee on Enterprise and Economic Strategy in Committee Stage, for instance, the comments of Deputy Byrne are telling but by no means unique:

To me, a horse left wandering is nothing short of criminal. We have an opportunity to do something about it. We are talking here about people who, when their horses are impounded, come with sledge-hammers, break down walls and gates and take out their horses. These are the people we are dealing with. Are we going to meet them with kid gloves?

This anti-Traveller and anti-horse sentiment finds further resonance in the comments of one senior official of Dublin Corporation justifying its policy, or lack thereof, towards Traveller horses:

We don't have the land to build houses, let alone cater for horses. Next week, the pet of the month could be elephants or crocodiles. Do we have to provide facilities for them?⁷

Major Provisions

The Act is discussed under three substantive headings – preliminary and general, licensing of horses in control areas, and the control of horses – and contains forty sections. The thrust of the Act is that it gives local authorities, defined here as county and borough councils as opposed to town councils, the power to seize, detain and impound unlicensed horses regarded as a danger or nuisance to people or property and to establish control areas in their administrative area within which horses can be seized. The Act places responsibility for horse control under the aegis of local authorities and compels horse owners to obtain a horse license from the local authority.

The first section of the Act maps out the basic thrust of the new law. The second section looks at the issue of licensing, how people may apply, and persons exempt from a license. It is clear that Travellers are the target of this part of the Act. The third part though is directed to local authorities because it concerns the powers they (along with the *Garda*) can exercise to control horses including the power to make bye-laws, to enter property, to seize and forfeit horses, to delineate control areas, and to serve notices of the seizure of horses to their owners. The next section of the paper looks at how these provisions have worked out in practice.

Implementation Problems

Horses seized and detained in a pound are usually returned to their owner after costs have been recovered by the local authority. If the owner does not pay the costs of their seizure and impounding, or if a given horse is seized three times, they are normally either sold to a horse-owner who can demonstrate that they have adequate facilities to care for them (under the act this means having a 12ft by 12ft stable with running water and a steady supply of heating) or else are put down. Horses seized under the Act are usually profiled by the pound receiving them and a microchip inserted into them. Further, a notice of their seizure and a complete description of the horses seized are put on public display for five days in the local *Garda* station. This allows the owner to identify his/her horses as well

as allowing the local authority to track and develop an inventory of horses seized. This seize-detain-release sequence described above tends to happen repeatedly with the result that a classic 'revolving door problem' emerges. Travellers may or may not find alternative grazing land that does not pose a nuisance or danger to other people.

In most cases, the local authority ends up playing a kind of 'hide-and-seek' game and Travellers and local authority officials become more and more disgruntled with one another. To the extent that this happens, the Act only provides a temporary solution to the problem and diverts attention from the underlying problem – the lack of adequate grazing land. The First Progress Report of the Committee to Monitor and Co-ordinate the Implementation of the Task Force on the Travelling Community stated that the Act was being implemented in a way that failed to 'recognize the role of horses in Traveller culture' (FPRTFC 2000: 10). It goes on to make a culture proofing argument in a section of the report dealing with Traveller culture. Thus, it states, 'the way we respond to Travellers who keep horses is a key test of the value we put on culture in devising responses to the needs of Travellers' (FPRTFC 2000: 10).

Noteworthy Consequences

From the standpoint of both Travellers and local authorities, the Act had a number of noteworthy consequences. First, it took responsibility for dealing with wandering horses out of the hands of informal social control agents such as Peace Commissioners⁸ and placed it firmly in the hands of formal institutions, that is, local authorities. However, the picture is more complex than this. Typically, local authorities hire private individuals, sometimes a local person but more often an outside private for-profit firm⁹ dedicated to seizing horses, on behalf of local authorities, in their administrative area. The reason for this seems to be that local authority officials are reluctant to be seen as formal social control agents and to put themselves at risk of intimidation from disgruntled Travellers whose horses have been seized. It is not uncommon for seized horses to be brought to a pound outside the local authority's administrative area partly due to the dearth of pounds but primarily because it minimizes the amount of local disturbance from disaffected Travellers.

Second, Travellers are often forced to travel long distances to secure the return of their horses, which adds to the heavy costs they already incur to the local authority. To escape this regulatory environment, some Travellers move their horses to counties where the Act is less rigorously implemented and where local authorities are more tolerant of wandering horses but sooner or later these 'refugee horses'¹⁰ as one newspaper called them, also become a target of the Act.

Third, the Act disempowers Travellers by threatening to undermine a central aspect of their culture. The Pavee Point Traveller Horse Owners' guide, for instance, argues that:

Travellers and Traveller organizations view the Control of Horses Act and the byelaws as yet further erosion of the Traveller economy and culture. The byelaws are having a particularly detrimental impact on Travellers given their poor accommodation status, discrimination and lack of ownership of land. (McCarthy n.d.: 30)

In 2002, the Irish Travellers Movement¹¹, an organization dedicated to advancing the interests of Irish Travellers, conducted a study on the socio-economic impact of the Act in which it is strongly critical of it. It argues, for instance, that the Act represents an 'erosion of Traveller culture and heritage' (ITM 2002: 7). Moreover, it contends that there was no outlet for Travellers to voice their views in the initial formulation of the act.

The Act, oddly enough, makes no mention of the establishment of youth horse projects for the training of Travellers in the care of horses. In introducing the Control of Horses Bill, 1996, to the Oireachtas, Minister Deenihan, stated that 'the Bill is regulatory rather than developmental and is hence an unsuitable vehicle for the furtherance of projects like the Cherry Orchard and Fettercairn Projects' (Second Stage, Dáil Éireann Official Report, 25 June 1996). Some deputies though, including the Minister, highlighted the importance of these projects and their capacity to make a meaningful contribution to resolving the wandering horse problem. The next section of the paper examines the horse project or 'corral project' response, as it is sometimes called, in deeper detail.

Traveller Youth Horse Projects

As an alternative to enforcing laws and invoking formal social control mechanisms, some disadvantaged communities have developed innovative ways to turn what most settled people perceive to be a 'problem' into an asset. I am referring here to the small number of Traveller Youth Horse Projects that actively promote Traveller participation and measures towards Traveller empowerment. For Travellers, especially young Traveller boys, horses may be one of the few things about life in disadvantaged urban communities that provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose that others find through crime and drugs.

A number of communities in Dublin have established Traveller Horse Projects with the aim of channelling Travellers' interest in horses into developing their confidence as a people. Fettercairn's Youth Horse Project in Tallaght and the Cherry Orchard Equine Project are notable examples of this. Both projects were established with significant funding from sources outside the communities they were established within, such as the European Union and the equine industry. They are cited as examples of best practice in the care and control of horses in large urban areas and have been the subject of documentaries, newspaper features and other media. The Fettercairn project is located on a twenty-seven-acre site adjacent to a large concentration of local authority housing and caters for twenty

horses at any one time. Young Travellers join the Project's club and through it gain training and education in, among other things, the care of horses. Although these projects have not been evaluated in a formal way, anecdotal evidence suggests that they are achieving positive outcomes in terms of developing the personal, social and vocational skills of project participants. This owes something to the fact that they exemplify good community development practice such as meeting local needs from the ground up, developing people's assets, respecting local tradition, mobilizing community resources and encouraging community participation (Murphy and Cunningham 2003).

Policy Implications

The RTFTC (1995) reported that the tradition of keeping horses is constrained by two factors – the lack of grazing facilities and the conflict between Travellers and settled people that arises from this (RTFTC 1995: 254). The RTFTC recommends that local authorities should make efforts to find appropriate grazing land for Traveller horses. This will, of course, require resources from the national government as well as a willingness on the part of local authorities to work with voluntary and community sector organizations in their administrative areas, to identify land that would be acceptable to Travellers as a place to graze their horses. Furthermore, it will demand a greater willingness on the part of local authorities to enter into open dialogue with Travellers who are current tenants, as well as with prospective tenants, about reconciling the keeping of horses with living in a local authority-provided house or halting site.

Support for this position comes from a number of government and non-governmental sources both old and new. The 1963 Commission on Itinerancy, widely judged to have viewed Traveller culture as emblematic of failed tradition, argued, contrary to the thrust of its more general recommendations, that:

Part of each (camping site or halting site) should be set aside for the stallage of the itinerants' animals and this section should be adequately fenced. All such animals should be subject to strict control and not permitted to wander outside the fenced area. (Commission on Itinerancy 1963: 54)

Thirty years later, another report, by the Limerick Travellers Development Group (1997), recommended, among other things, 'that the planning of future halting sites and group housing schemes incorporate Traveller culture by catering for horses, trailers, and scrap dealing for those families who request such provision' (Whyte 1997: 12). To my knowledge, no such planning has been carried out by any local authority in Ireland. The report goes on to say that 'given the requirements of keeping a horse in Limerick city are so stringent, it is unreasonable to expect Travellers, who do not have adequate accommodation for

themselves, to have such resources to accommodate a horse' (Whyte 1997: 12). In 2002, the Irish Traveller Movement, in its report on the impact of the Act, resonates with this in its conviction that:

Accommodation should take into account space for animals in the design and building of group housing and halting sites. The high percentage of Travellers living in standard housing, who continue to keep horses, reveals that even if Travellers do not remain in Traveller specific accommodation the economic necessity and traditions of keeping horses do not disappear. (ITM 2002: 14)

The Policy-Culture Linkage

As mentioned earlier, the keeping of horses is a central aspect of Irish Traveller culture and identity and has a special meaning for Traveller boys and men. Although Travellers are less inclined now than ever before to use horses as a mode of transportation because of the availability of motorized vehicles, they continue to play an important symbolic and material role often functioning as a bearer of status within the Traveller community. In this paper I argue that the current emphasis on the Act as a solution to the wandering horse problem represents a threat to the survival of this tradition. To be sure, not all Travellers live in local authority-provided housing or halting sites and not all Travellers housed by local authorities keep horses. But for those that do, the expectation among most local authorities seems to be that they should abandon the horse keeping tradition altogether or alternatively keep their horses far away from their place of residence. Travellers, however, typically want to keep their horses close by either in a local green area, often to the ire of local people, or in the field of a sympathetic farmer.

Reports by Traveller organizations, highlight the difficulty of maintaining the horse keeping tradition in the face of attempts through institutional controls such as the Control of Horses Act to induce Travellers to adopt settled ways of living. These reports suggest the need for policy makers to pay more attention to the meanings Travellers attach to cultural practices often seen by settled people as a threat to the project of modernity.

I now turn to the contribution that anthropology¹² (and sociology) scholars can make to sensitizing policy makers to the symbolic and material value of horses among Travellers. First, because anthropological research emphasizes the importance of respecting the views and opinions of people (Okely 1994), it calls for the genuine inclusion and participation of Travellers in public policy formulation with respect to their horses. In the past, the voice of Travellers has tended to be silenced, ignored or overlooked although clearly advances have been made recently in terms of encouraging Traveller participation in the policy decision-making process through fora such as Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees at local level. Outlets such as these and others allow

Travellers to articulate the implications for their cultural practices of laws developed, implemented and evaluated by settled people. Second, anthropology is well-positioned to emphasize, in public policy debates, the importance of respecting other ways of living that do not conform to the taken-for-granted values and norms of the dominant society. Consider, for instance, the differences between Travellers and settled people with respect to how they conceive of space and boundaries and how they relate to the formal economy (Kuhling 1998).

Anthropologists can also highlight the importance of accommodating Travellers' desire to keep horses in housing allocation decisions and halting site plans made by local authorities while also respecting the safety concerns of settled people. To do this would be to acknowledge, as Saris et al point out, that horses provide an important source of everyday local meaning for Travellers, especially young boys, in contexts where there are few alternative sources of meaning and significance (Saris et al. 2000; see also Saris and Bartley 2002). Put another way, anthropologists can make explicit the cultural values, theories and assumptions that underpin public policies and the relations of power reproduced by them. Policies with respect to Travellers, whether they have to do with education, health or accommodation, tend to be framed according to the worldview of settled people and their conception of what constitutes 'proper', 'civilized' living with the result that Travellers' way of perceiving, understanding and navigating the social world is rarely reflected in policy. Behind the policy to control Travellers' horses lies a powerful and unstated view of what constitutes normalcy. This view says that settlement is the optimal way of living and that the tradition of nomadism, of which the horse keeping tradition is a central part, poses a threat to this way of living. Nomadism, after all, refuses to accept boundaries of work, family, neighbourhood and community that define the settled way of life and that are taken for granted within it (see Adams et al. 1975).

Crucial to achieving these goals is the need to ensure that anthropological and sociological studies about Travellers are disseminated widely to policy actors such as elected officials, civil servants, the business community and community/voluntary sector organizations especially those representing Travellers. Important too is communicating anthropological work in a way that is accessible to diverse non-specialist audiences. Otherwise, there is a danger that policy makers and anthropologists will talk past each other and ultimately that public policies will be culturally short-sighted.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is not to trivialize the claims of settled people that wandering horses pose a threat to the health and safety of people. Neither, it must be observed, does it seek to exonerate Travellers from their responsibilities to adequately control horses under their care and to respect the rights of settled

people to live without fear of their property being damaged by stray horses or of their children being killed or seriously injured. Rather, it seeks to draw attention to the importance of understanding the conditions that create the wandering horse problem in the first place – the lack of adequate grazing land in close proximity to Travellers' houses and halting sites and of the failure of policy makers to understand the meaning Travellers attach to horses in their daily lives.

As long as the Act is used as a substitute for making this land available to Travellers and for developing a better understanding of the place of horses in Traveller culture, then it will be an ineffective response, in the long-run, to the wandering horse problem. To argue that Travellers can only be accommodated in housing and halting sites if they repudiate the keeping of horses is incongruent with the values and ideals of a pluralist society. The challenge in such a society is to develop a universal cultural code that accommodates cultural differences that collide with it. This implies that the values of one minority social group should not be subordinated to the values, norms and beliefs of a hegemonic group as is the case in the cultural clash between Travellers and settled people around the practice of keeping horses.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Dr Carolyn Nordstrom, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame, for a helpful conversation about an earlier draft of this paper.
2. The nomenclature of Travellers has undergone change over time. Traditionally, Travellers were known as 'tinkers' because they worked as tinsmiths, selling pots, kettles and the like. During the 1960s, they came to be known as 'Itinerants', a term that has negative undertones (Gmelch 1987). Other pejorative terms by which they are known include 'knackers' and 'gypos' (Mac Laughlin 1995: 69). Today, the term 'Traveller' is more widely used and accepted. In the 1960s, the first government-led effort to understand the condition of Travellers in Irish society resulted in the Commission on Itinerancy (1963), followed later by the Review Body on the Travelling People (1983), and later still by the Task Force on the Travelling Community (1995) (Fanning 2002: 156–157). Fanning writes that over time there was a shift in official understandings of Travellers as a problem because of their culture of poverty towards the view that Travellers are victims of institutional discrimination. This shift in the definition of the Traveller 'problem' in turn shaped solutions developed to overcome it. Thus there has been a movement away from a focus on assimilating Travellers into mainstream settled society towards challenging institutional practices that discriminate against Travellers (Fanning 2002: 156–157).
3. Generally speaking, before a Bill is passed into law as an Act in Ireland, it passes through five stages in the Dáil and Seanad (houses of parliament) before the President or Head of State signs it into law. These are the First Stage (the relevant Minister introduces the Bill in both houses), the Second Stage (the general thrust of the Bill is discussed), the Third or Committee Stage (the finer details are considered either by the Dáil and/or a committee established by it, as happened in the case of the Control of Horses Bill), the Fourth Stage (the Committee stage is reviewed), and the Fifth stage (wrap-up).

4. Taoiseach or Prime Minister (Head of Government) is the Irish or Gaelic word for chieftain meaning leader.
5. The term 'disadvantaged' is used widely in social policy debates in Ireland to denote people who are living in poverty or at high risk of being in poverty. Included in this category are lone parents, people with disabilities, prisoners, and Travellers.
6. Select Committee on Enterprise and Economic Strategy, Dáil Report. Wednesday, 10 July 1996. (Record of proceedings of the Committee Stage before the enactment of the Control of Horses Bill).
7. *The Irish Times*. Horse licensing laws will affect ghetto culture. 15 August 1997.
8. A Peace Commissioner is a person of good standing in the community who is appointed by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform to witness the signing of official documents and sign certificates under various acts of parliament. In addition, Peace Commissioners, as the name implies, are sometimes called upon to resolve local disputes or skirmishes in an informal, 'behind-the-scenes' manner.
9. Local authorities typically contract outside firms to seize horses on their behalf. These firms are operated by private individuals who travel from county to county seizing horses and bringing them to a local pound. They often conduct the seizing of horses, in a quasi-military style, in the early hours of the morning to avoid confrontation with the owner and in the presence of a local *Garda* (police officer) and/or local authority official.
10. *The Irish Times*. Counties to round up Dublin's stray horses on the run. 2 April 1998.
11. The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) has played a pivotal role in politicizing the marginalized condition of Travellers in Irish society and in providing an outlet for Travellers to amplify their grievances towards settled society (see Gmelch 1987).
12. Taylor claims that anthropologists in Ireland have had little impact on debates about major social and cultural issues, largely, he claims, because most of their studies have tended to bear upon small rural communities in the West of Ireland. However, he goes on to argue that Irish anthropologists can play an important role in helping to understand the construction of Irish collective identity (Taylor 1996). And Travellers, I argue, should be part of the telling of this story.

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— 400 (21 June, 1990)

- 463 (27 March, 1996)
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Summary

The practice of keeping horses is a central part of Irish Traveller culture although it does not figure very large in the literature on Irish Travellers. In recent years, this practice has become a locus of policy intervention. The use of the Control of Horses Act, 1996, as a solution to the wandering horse problem threatens to devalue the horse-keeping tradition and marginalize Travellers from mainstream settled society.

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